

in a CLASS of their own

They instill a love of learning, offer encouragement in facing a new challenge and even push us toward a particular path in life. The following six teachers will be remembered long after their students have left their classrooms.

By Amy Reinink | Photos by Michael Ventura

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Jason McFeaters, Chorus, North Bethesda Middle School

The 8:40 a.m. chorus class at North Bethesda Middle School is part choir practice, part musical theater, with Jason McFeaters playing the lead role.

Class starts with the song “Hi, My Name Is Joe,” which turns the group of some 65 kids into a giggling mass of whirling limbs. McFeaters barks at the sopranos to “keep it light” and at the baritones to “flex their muscles.” He doesn’t match his students in energy, he surpasses them as he skips, shouts and sings his way through warm-ups.

But when the class finally turns to its performance pieces, the chaos subsides and the polished harmony that has won the choir superior ratings at county and state competitions emerges.

A concert saxophonist who oc-

asionally performs with the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, McFeaters first taught middle school because he needed the health insurance as a doctoral student at the Peabody Conservatory of Johns Hopkins University. He found his “hyper, scatterbrained, crazy-guy personality just seemed to work with middle school.”

McFeaters started six years ago with 28 kids at North Bethesda. Today he has 220. Nicknamed “McAwesome” by his students, he chaperones school trips, sits with the kids at lunch and even runs the mile with them in gym class.

Principal Alton Sumner jokes that a false rumor about McFeaters leaving “just about sparked a riot”

among parents at a principal’s coffee last December.

“People fight to get their kids into the class when it’s full,” says James Parker of Bethesda, whose two sons took McFeaters’ class.

McFeaters, 33, says his goal is not just to make the kids better singers, but to “access a different part of who they are” through music.

“In this area, kids are so high-strung and academically stressed out,” says McFeaters, who lives in Potomac with his two sons and his wife, Arianna, a teacher at the Primary Day School in Bethesda. “I have nothing against taking five math classes. I just think there’s something they get in the music department that they won’t get anywhere else in their life.”



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Nancy Mornini, Art, Walt Whitman High School, Bethesda



Nancy Mornini, aka “Mrs. Mo,” was inspired to pursue art by her own high school teacher. Now she inspires students herself.

It’s sometimes hard to tell Nancy Mornini apart from her students when she makes the rounds in her art class at Walt Whitman High School.

Not just because of her 5-foot-2-inch stature or her youthful energy. But because “Mrs. Mo,” as the students call her, is treated as trusted friend by the kids as well as respected and authoritative teacher.

“There were certain things in high school I couldn’t talk to my mom about, and I knew I could always talk to [Mornini] to get the perspective of both a mother and a friend,” says Chase Hendrigsman, 21, of Bethesda, a junior at Louisiana State University who still talks to his former teacher every few weeks. Hendrigsman credits Mornini with his decision to major in advertising.

Mornini, 57, was inspired to pursue art by her own art teacher at Northwood High School in Silver Spring. Mrs. Frances Davila “saw that I had some sort of talent or ability,” Mornini says, “and gave me confidence by nurturing that.”

Mornini spent 17 years using art therapy to help students with mental health issues at Rockville’s Chestnut Lodge school before coming to Whitman in 1999. She lives in Rockville with her husband, Joe, a special education resource teacher at Whitman and founder of Team River Runner, a white-water boating program for wounded vets and their families. The two often co-chaperone school ski trips. She also heads the WhitManiacs spirit club, sponsors the junior class and attends Whitman events ranging from athletic games to the senior banquet.

Mornini even writes to students, suggesting future paths in art, such as digital art for a computer-savvy kid.

Kathleen Cahill of Bethesda has three children who remained close to Mornini long after graduation. “Whether they’re artists or not, she finds a way to connect with every student,” Cahill says.



“Kindergarten is so important,” Sarah Alley says, “because if you don’t like school from the beginning, it’s hard to [develop] that enthusiasm later.”

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Sarah Alley, Kindergarten, Rosemary Hills Primary School, Silver Spring

Sarah Alley can’t remember a time when she didn’t want to be a kindergarten teacher.

Growing up in Missouri, Alley, 31, had a string of great teachers who made elementary school feel “like it wasn’t a big, scary thing.”

She thought she could create the same kind of classroom as a teacher, and she has never seriously imagined doing anything else.

“Kindergarten is so important, because if you don’t like school from the beginning, it’s hard to [develop] that

enthusiasm later,” says Alley, who lives in Rockville with her husband, Danny, and daughter.

Alley started as a first-grade teacher at Rosemary Hills in Silver Spring shortly after graduating from the University of Maryland with a degree in early childhood education. She switched to kindergarten six years ago and has become the kind of teacher older kids talk about with younger siblings.

When Anna O’Keefe, 9, found out her 6-year-old brother, Charlie, was in Alley’s class, “she ran around the house screaming,

‘You got Mrs. Alley, you got Mrs. Alley!’” says their mother, Kristin O’Keefe.

Transitioning from part-time preschool to a full day of learning in kindergarten can be tough. But Alley has set up a “quiet corner” in her classroom where kids can step away if they feel overwhelmed.

Alley also wins kids’ trust by getting to know each individually at the beginning of the year, which helps when she introduces new challenges, such as reading.

“They think, ‘She’s asking me to do this because she knows me, and she knows that I can,’” Alley says.



Students blow bubbles to see how light waves interact with a thin film of soap in Kelly Tomon's physics class, which often is voted students' favorite class in their senior survey.

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Kelly Tomon, Physics, Connelly School of the Holy Child, Potomac

"This will not be a quiet class," Kelly Tomon warns a visitor as she begins a physics lesson that soon buzzes with activity.

Tomon encourages her students to comment during a YouTube video that shows soap bubbles swirling with color. As they blow their own bubbles afterward, they "ooh" in amazement at the colors. The topic is how light waves interact with a thin film such as soap, and the students are riveted.

Tomon heads the science department in the Upper School at the all-girls Connelly School of the Holy Child in Potomac—an unlikely demographic to choose physics as their favorite class, as students do almost every year in their senior survey.

Tomon teaches girls to "really think,

not just spit back definitions." It's the same approach her biology teacher, Mr. Tippit, took when she attended high school in Texas more than 25 years ago.

"Girls don't come to science with the excitement boys do," says Tomon, 41, who arrived at Holy Child eight years ago after teaching in Rhode Island. "I felt like I could make it understandable and exciting for them."

Tomon, who lives in Montgomery Village with her husband, John, and three children, started her career doing genetic research, which she found "exciting but isolating." She took a long-term, substitute-teaching position in 1993, and "something just clicked."

Head of Upper School Teri Boragno says she's accustomed to seeing Tomon's class shooting Nerf rockets in the hallway (to demonstrate projectile motion) or zooming around the school on scooters (to illustrate the relationship of acceleration, displacement and time).

"The girls absolutely love her class," Boragno says.

Tomon says it's all about sharing her own amazement over how science unveils the mysteries of the natural world.

"Something as simple as the reason we see different colors in a soap bubble really awes me," Tomon says. "When you understand the science behind the things you see, it makes everything amazing."

Riki Weeks, Math, Barrie School, Silver Spring

Wearing a scruffy beard and khaki shorts, Riki Weeks looks as if he's ready for a day at the beach. But don't let the laid-back demeanor fool you. He's a serious math whiz with a rare ability to communicate his passion for the subject to students at the Barrie School in Silver Spring.

Weeks, 31, grew up poor in a family that bounced around Maryland and Pennsylvania. Math offered order and stability.

"It didn't matter who was teaching, or what school you were in: Algebra was algebra," says Weeks, who lives in Silver Spring with his wife, Jackie, and two kids. "That was something I could cling to."

Weeks discovered a love of teaching while tutoring as a student at Salisbury University on the Eastern Shore. He wanted to be a college professor. But the summer after graduation he instead accepted a job at Barrie, where he discovered a knack for teaching teens.

Six years later, Weeks teaches sixth-through 12th grade math, is dean of the ninth grade, coaches basketball, leads volunteer trips and helps coordinate the school's cardboard boat races, a popular event at the end of every school year in which students build and race cardboard boats across the school's swimming pool.

"If you're trying to spark someone's enthusiasm for math in their late teens or 20s or 30s, it's often too late," Weeks says. "In middle school, they haven't lost that sense of wonder that lets them appreciate how cool math can be."

Weeks demonstrates that through real-world applications.

"I've always been good at math," says 12-year-old Nick Paladino of Silver Spring, who devised a detailed business plan for a rental-car company in Weeks' sixth-grade class last year as part of a lesson on linear relationships. "But he helps you love math."



Riki Weeks helps coordinate the school's cardboard boat races when he's not trying to impart to students his enthusiasm for math.



Vicki Otten spent nearly two decades on Capitol Hill before deciding she wanted to work in education, rather than on education policy.

Vicki Otten, Fifth Grade, Murch Elementary School, Upper Northwest D.C.

Vicki Otten manages to charm her fifth-grade students while commanding their attention at Murch Elementary School in Washington, D.C.

It's a skill Otten, 62, perfected not in the classroom, but on Capitol Hill, where she spent nearly two decades as a legislative director to Sen. Paul Simon (D-Ill.), specializing in women's, children's and social welfare issues.

Otten wanted a break from politics when she started volunteering in her son's fourth-grade classroom in 1997. But she "loved the sense of wonder, curiosity and accomplishment" she saw in the kids. After years of working on education policy, "I figured it was time to put my money where my mouth is." So she started a master's program in education at Johns Hopkins University.

In January 2004, she was asked to fill in at Murch as a long-term substitute. That led to a permanent position teach-

ing fifth-grade social studies and American history the next year, and Otten finished her master's through American University.

Six years later, students, parents and administrators praise Otten's knack for reaching every student.

"She literally takes a whole page [on a report card] to describe what each child brings to the classroom and what each child needs to work on," says Mickie Simon of Washington, D.C., whose two oldest daughters have been students of Otten's.

Principal Dawn Ellis says Otten is "one of those inventive, exciting teachers who make the subject come alive."

Students learned about the Westward Expansion by spending four to six weeks studying, writing about and actually simulating the pioneers' journey on the Oregon Trail by splitting up into several "wagon trains" and making decisions about their route and overcom-

ing obstacles like running out of water and broken wagon wheels. And after using the song "My Girl" to teach personal pronouns, Otten not only "sang" it with her students at the school's lip-synching contest, she also brought a large group to see the Temptations at the Music Center at Strathmore last December.

"I never thought I'd end up teaching, but once I started, it just seemed to make sense," says Otten, who lives in Washington, D.C., with her husband, William Barringer. "I'm so lucky to have these two incredible careers that have given me joy, provided me challenges and have allowed me to grow." ■

Amy Reinink's work has appeared in The Washington Post, Entrepreneur and Runner's World. She lives in Silver Spring. If you'd like to comment on this story, e-mail comments@bethesdamagazine.com.